

Safety of Your Child with a Disability



A Safety Awareness Program

Safety is often a parental concern. As parents, we want our children to be safe from accidents, illnesses, physical harm, bullying, drugs, etc. In considering our children's safety, preventing abuse is essential.

We have a key role in protecting our children from abuse whether our child has a mild or severe disability. Parents can be proactive in preventing victimization by teaching about personal safety. It is also important to help our kids build awareness of their emotions and personal boundaries.

Teaching our children about personal safety is an ongoing process and following are some suggestions for tackling this issue. These tips can be adapted to your child's learning needs.

- *Listen and observe* - Listen to what they tell you, especially if they are uncomfortable. Watch for signs of changes in behavior, emotions, withdrawal, etc.
- *Feelings* - Discuss feelings (e.g., happy, scared, angry, safe, confused) and provide examples of situations when people may have these feelings.
- *Touches* - Identify various types of touches that are appropriate (e.g., a goodnight kiss from mom, high fives with friends, medical check ups) and touches that are not okay (e.g., pulling hair or touching one's private parts without permission).
- *Safety planning with your child* - Discuss possible safe ways to respond to hurtful or dangerous situations. Examples include leaving the situation, yelling for help, saying "No!" and telling trusted adults. Have your child identify who they trust.
- *Rights* - Talk to your child about their rights. Allow them to make choices and to tell you "no" sometimes. If someone tries to hurt them, they will have practice saying "no."
- *Secrets* - Talk about "fun" and "special" secrets. A surprise birthday party is a "fun" secret and is okay not to tell. "Special" secrets are hurtful (e.g., an adult fondling a child and making a threat if the child tells). A child needs to tell trusted adults if someone asks them to keep a "special" secret.
- *Social behaviors* - Teach your child about behaviors that are socially acceptable in public (e.g., shaking hands) versus private places (e.g., changing clothes).
- *Values* - Teach your family, cultural or religious values about sexuality and relationships.

- *Sexuality/Puberty* - Discuss the medical terms and functions for all the body parts (including the private parts for males and females). As puberty approaches, talk about natural body changes for boys and girls.
- *Personal care* - If your child needs personal assistance with hygiene at school, check if the bathroom doors close or if there is a curtain around the change area. Make sure you and your child are comfortable with staff responsible for your child's hygiene.
- *School* - Ask your child's school to provide abuse prevention, sexuality education, and personal safety drills to reinforce the concepts taught at home.
- *Suspicion/Disclosure of Abuse* - If your child tells you about abuse, believe them. Call 911 if there is current danger. Report any suspicion of abuse, neglect, or exploitation to the local police department and child protective services. Seek medical attention if necessary.
- *Support* - If your child has been abused, consider seeking counseling for your child with a therapist or through a local domestic violence or rape crisis agency. This may help him/her heal from the trauma.
- *Communication* - If your child uses a communication board or other augmentative communication device, the device may need to be updated with words or symbols for communicating about personal safety. Other possibilities may include a switch with a pre-recorded message, whistle or other personal alarm device for signaling emergencies.
- *Personal care providers* - When hiring personal care providers, be clear about your expectations, check references, do background checks, and offer the employee ongoing supervision and feedback.
- *Internet* - If your child uses the Internet, instruct them not to give personal information to anyone.
- *Other providers* - If your child lives in a group home or institution, get to know the direct care staff and administration. Visit often. Trust your instincts and address your concerns if you think there may be problems.
- *Modeling* - Be a role model by using non-violent discipline.

Take advantage of natural teaching moments that come about based on where the child is developmentally. Build upon safety information as the child grows and develops (e.g., dating, sexual relationships, managing personal care attendants).

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